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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IS](#) [EG](#)  
SUBJECT: A/S WELCH MARCH 6 MEETING WITH FM ABOUL GHEIT

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Stuart Jones  
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (S) Summary. A/S Welch discussed Lebanon and the Israeli-Palestinian situation with FM Aboul Gheit on March 6. Aboul Gheit expressed frustration over the recent Israeli military operation in Gaza. A/S Welch outlined our strategy to maintain momentum on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The rockets from Gaza into Israel must be addressed, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations would resume, and we would continue to support increased humanitarian and economic assistance to the Palestinians. The Egyptians need to control the Philadelphia strip; now is the time to talk with the Israelis. Aboul Gheit offered a bleak outlook on Lebanon, reporting that the Arab League ministerial meeting had not resulted in increased pressure on Syria, and that Lebanon will be sans president for an extended period. He assessed that many key Arab heads of state would not attend the March 28-30 summit in Damascus. By the end of the day, however, we had heard that UAE President Sheikh Khalifeh had announced his intention to attend. End summary.

12. (S) Aboul Gheit reported that tensions were high at the Arab League Ministerial meeting (March 4-5) in connection with the recent Israeli military operations in Gaza. He said that the PA continues to complain that the Israelis are not serious about negotiations. Continuous Israeli-Hamas conflict might result in a weakened Hamas, Aboul Gheit said, but it would undoubtedly destroy prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace. He said that the Israelis must be more flexible. "They think they are macho but they must realize they cannot win by attacking Gaza." A/S Welch outlined our strategy to get back on track. The Secretary had announced the parties' intention to resume Israeli-Palestinian negotiations; General Fraser would participate in a trilateral working group that was expected to meet in the coming week. The PA team wants to move as quickly as possible, and the Israeli-PA teams may meet as early as March 9; expected issues for immediate discussion are borders and security. A/S Welch assessed that FM Livni's position was evolving positively as the political stakes increased for her.

13. (S) Gaza: Aboul Gheit said that the situation needed a period of calm. The immediate objective must be to stabilize the border. EGIS Chief Soliman would continue to work for a prisoner exchange (to include IDF soldier Shalit). This would help provide the right environment for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to proceed. Senior Advisor Hossam Zaki asked if the USG would be able to prevail upon Israeli Defense Minister Barak to prevent another military operation. A/S Welch responded that Prime Minister Olmert had taken the position that if the rockets stopped, there would be no need for further military action. However, even if the rockets stopped in the short term, the longer term reality is that Hamas will seek to rebuild its capacity, and

some in the Israeli government favor military action to preempt this. Aboul Gheit agreed to continue to press Hamas, through lower level contacts, to maintain calm.

14. A/S Welch said that progress on securing the Philadelphi corridor was critical, and that Egyptian-Israeli cooperation on the Philadelphi corridor was essential to this. It would give the Israelis a basis to relax restrictions at the Israeli-Gazan border crossings, which would allow for improved humanitarian conditions. Aboul Gheit agreed, but said that an arrangement for the opening of Rafah crossing was a "must." The GOE is taking steps to strengthen the border. Minister of Defense Tantawi is supervising the effort; the Ministry of Interior has added to the number of police both at the border and the city of Al Arish. The Egyptians intend to supervise the coastline, but this will take time, Aboul Gheit said.

15. (S) Gilad Visit: A/S Welch said that an Israeli Ministry of Defense delegation led by Amos Gilad would visit Cairo March 9. The Israelis have signaled a "more positive spirit" toward working with the Egyptians. Aboul Gheit said that Israeli MFA Director General Abramowitz had visited him last week, but said he seemed to be weak in comparison with Israeli MOD interlocutors. Aboul Gheit said that EGIS Chief Soliman remains the main GOE interlocutor for Israel.

16. (S) Rafah: Both Aboul Gheit and A/S Welch agreed that by maintaining the ability to launch rockets into Israel and to breach the border with Egypt, Hamas had accrued powerful leverage. The recent increase in rocket activity had derailed efforts to pressure Syria at the Arab League Ministerial, and had caused a disruption at the United Nations as the Security Council deliberated on the latest Iran resolution. Hamas holds the trigger, and there is no

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easy solution. "Hamas' masters (i.e. Syria and Iran) say: fire the rockets and we will support you financially," Aboul Gheit said. He assessed that Hamas rocket attacks fit a "larger picture" of Syrian/Iranian activity. "They pushed Israel to retaliate. Hamas' objective is to gain recognition and to have a normal relationship with Egypt. And they are playing the game very well." He said that any formulation for re-opening Rafah crossing would have to include the presence of Hamas, in a limited way, on the Gaza-Egypt border, but without any "legality or official recognition."

17. (S) Lebanon: Aboul Gheit was pessimistic on Lebanon. "Lebanon will not be sorted out for a long time and we might not have a president for an extended period of time." The Syrians, he assessed, had managed to achieve two goals: maintaining instability in Lebanon, and ensuring that the Arab League Summit in Damascus (March 28-30) would take place as planned. The situation in Gaza had made it extremely difficult for Egypt and Saudi Arabia to pressure Syria at the Arab League Ministerial of March 4-5. Syria had rejected all proposals to reach a solution on Lebanon, e.g. appointment of a special Arab League Committee or establishment of "target dates."

18. (S) He believed that few major heads of state would attend the Damascus summit, but that it would go forward. Based on the conversations at the Arab League Ministerial, he expected Sudan, Algiers, Qatar, Djibouti, Yemen, the Comoros, and the Palestinian Authority would send heads of state. We could prevail, possibly, on Mauritania and Iraq not to send their heads of state; Aboul Gheit said it would be suitable for Lebanon to send an under-secretary level representative. As for Libya, Qadaffi would not attend if Iranian President Ahmadinejad did attend (as expected). (Note: While Aboul Gheit was confident that the remainder of Arab League states would not attend, by the end of the day the United Arab Emirates had announced attendance at the head of state level. End Note). Both agreed that the USG should continue to maintain a low profile in terms of pressuring states not to

attend the summit. Aboul Gheit said that the Egyptian strategic objective for Syria remains its disengagement from Iran.

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